

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGER'S ROUNDTABLE WITH MAJOR GENERAL MARK HERTLING,  
COMMANDER OF GENERAL MULTI-NATIONAL DIVISION NORTH AND FIRST ARMORED DIVISION  
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CHIEF, NEW MEDIA OPERATIONS, OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE PUBLIC  
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MR. HOLT: Major General Mark P. Hertling, who's the Multi- National  
Division North 1st Armored Division Commanding general -- just taken command  
from Major General Mixon there at MND North.

Sir, do you have an opening statement for us?

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah, the only thing I'd say as an opening statement is  
this is an exciting time in Multi-National Division North. There are some  
unique opportunities that are going to happen during, I think, our stay here.  
General Mixon has really -- General Mixon and the whole Tropic Lightning crew  
from the 25th Division out of Hawaii have really set us up for success because  
they have done an extreme disservice to the enemy over their last 15 months  
here. But they've also linked very well with their Iraqi counterparts and we're  
bearing the fruits of that labor with some great Iraqi division commanders and  
some superb Iraqi police chiefs or equivalent.

And what I'll tell you, too, is this is not my first time in Iraq. The  
last time I was here was 2004 for a 15-month tour in Baghdad, and being here in  
northern Iraq now is very interesting because it's a very complex, unique and  
diverse environment in the north. Very different from Baghdad, but also very  
exciting and I think that we're on the verge of doing some very strong things  
and helping the Iraqi people stand up against terrorism and extremism.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

Well, if you're ready, we'll move into the question-and-answer session.

GEN. HERTLING: Okay.

MR. HOLT: And once again, when I call your name, just state your full  
name and your publication.

So Andrew, why don't you get us started?

Q Thank you.

Good afternoon, General. This is Andrew Lubin from U.S. Calvary  
OnPoint.

First, we'd like to thank --

GEN. HERTLING: Andrew, I'm glad they picked you first because I'm a Cavalryman, and I love talking to other Cavalrymen. Go ahead.

Q Sounds good, sir. Appreciate that.

Sir, could you talk just a bit about the EFP factory in -- that was found? Largely made the news here, so can you give us some background as to how much you found and is there any way to tie this back to the government of Iran?

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah. I can say a couple things about it and I'm glad it largely made the news here because it was some great work by the folks down in the 4th Brigade Second Infantry Division, a Stryker Brigade that was working down in Diyala. And it was found in the Khan Bani Sa'ad area of Diyala Province. It was the largest -- from what we understand, the largest cache of EFPs. There were about 130 already pre-made EFPs. And when I say pre-made, I'm talking about the copper plates -- brass plates hooked to explosives and wired, ready to be in-placed. About another 1,370 or so plates themselves that were not preassembled but could have easily become preassembled -- so we're talking over 350 total EFPs -- and when I mean EFPs, I'm talking about simply the plates as well as a lot of C-4. And when I'm talking a lot, I think -- I want to say it was 600 blocks of C-4, a bunch of rockets -- I'm sorry, 600 pounds of C-4. I said "blocks." I meant pounds. A bunch of rockets, mortar rounds -- 100 mortar rounds, about 30 107 rockets, a couple of mortar tubes and -- let's see, what else did they have down there? It was just a large cache found in a home and we already have had reflections that it appears to have hurt the enemy significantly. It was one of their larger caches and we know that for sure already. I can't tell you how know, but we do. And it was found as a result of some great work by not only the soldiers of the 4th Brigade Second Infantry Division Stryker, but also based on a tip from a local citizen to an Iraqi police officer who then notified the Stryker Brigade and some Iraqi soldiers, and they were in a very short period of time able to find this individual, find the cache and arrest a couple of people associated with him.

Q Great. Thank you very much.

And is there any way to tie any of this back to the Iranian government?

GEN. HERTLING: You know, I've got to be careful on that because what I'll tell you is we're not really sure 100 percent where it came from. There are certainly indicators that in the past, as you know, there have been some passages of EFPs from across the border. So anything I would say specifically would be conjecture to the press, but I think we've got a pretty good idea of where exactly it came from and how it got here.

Q Great. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

David Axe.

Q Yes, sir. Hi. It's David Axe of the Aviation Week Group.

So -- your predecessor had some pretty harsh words of the Iraqi government on handing over command to you. And so you're in an area dominated by Kurds. Do you see it as your responsibility at all to facilitate better

cooperation between Kurds and the other ethnic and religious groups in Iraq? And if so, how do we go about doing that, especially with the Kurdish government sort of -- say, the Kurdish regional government sort of seemingly, you know, barricading itself in this kind of a defensive position -- what, with the tensions with Turkey?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, first of all, I'd to clarify -- I think General Nixon's statements that I think were probably termed -- that you would term as harsh -- and I'm not trying to be pejorative, but they were a little bit blunt, having to do not with the entire Iraqi government, but one specific ministry --  
Q Right.

GEN. HERTLING: -- and that was the Ministry of Interior.

Q Interior.

But I mean, the problem sort of -- the general problem is --

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah.

Q -- just sort of applies to everyone, though.

GEN. HERTLING: Well, what I'll say on that and I'll -- you know, it's interesting. I'm a good -- General Nixon and I are good friends. We got back to when we were majors.

We attended the Staff College together, so I know Randy very well. He knows me. I don't think I would couch it the same way as he did. The way I see it, quite frankly, is -- and having been here, like I said before -- I see the Iraqi government as an institution that is trying to get its processes and procedures down under some very tough and demanding and challenging situations with trying to blend a couple of different cultures, as you stated, but also some -- under some very challenging conditions -- read that complex counterinsurgency and their population being killed by an extreme group of radicals, both AQI and other extremists.

So I'm not sure I would be as hard on the Iraqi government. I think they -- in some cases have been given somewhat of some bad press when they're really just trying to work through the problems of government under some very trying circumstances. And -- oh, by the way, doing quite well at it in my view. Now there are certainly some bureaucratic problems. There are certainly some special interest groups and, gee whiz, I don't know of any other government that has those kind of things going on. Do you? But they're also under some extreme pressure to produce some actions because their people want stuff -- security, specifically -- right now. One of the things we're seeing as a success here -- the awakening, the reconciliation, the concerned local citizens -- all those things are as a result, I think, of the people beginning to see that, in fact, in many cases they are getting better security.

There is the potential for the government to start standing up. They are much different than a couple years ago -- when I was last here where it seemed the Iraqi people were on the fence and trying to decide which way things were going to go, and having been caught in that situation before, where when they chose the wrong horse to back, they were either killed or banished. Now, they're -- they -- I think the Iraqi culture and the Iraqi people are beginning to see themselves as somewhat stabilizing and I know that counters what a lot of

folks read in the press. But that's sort of what I think we're seeing over here and what we saw last time as well.

Q General, could I follow up real quick? That seems like a really rosy assessment, especially in a culture that's as top down as Iraqi -- or in a society that's as top down as Iraqi society is. It seems to me that the awakening and the local citizens -- concerned citizens groups -- there's a limit to how much national progress those kinds of movements can encourage. We still need government reconciliation. And you know, most people would assess the Iraqi government's progress on that front as being extremely poor. So I'm a little bit surprised at your positive assessment of this.

GEN. HERTLING: Well, and if it sounded like I was painting a rosy picture, I hope I can correct that and say I'm not. There's still a lot -- there's still a lot -- a lot of hard work to be done!

But in -- you know, it was interesting to me: I was in Germany training up for this mission when General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker addressed Congress. And it struck me as interesting what Ambassador Crocker said and that had to do with, you know, this whole thing started with a central government pushing down to the provinces in a very centralized format. I think what he then said -- and I'm paraphrasing -- was what we're seeing is that now it appears that the strength is being gained in the provinces pushing up to the central government.

And I'm not a politician. I'm not a politician and I'm not a diplomat, so I don't want to go too far into this, but that's sort of what I'm seeing. It's an emerging federalistic system where each province, like our states, has their own special interests. Like you said before, it is a very diverse culture with a lot of ethnic representation. And each province -- I know at least in MND-North -- each province is very different. We've got four provinces that we're dealing with where we have forces and another three provinces where we're over watching, because they've already turned over to provincial Iraqi control. And each one of those provinces is very different from the others with not only culture in the society that it serves, but also the kind of things that go on there: the manufacturing, the farming, whatever.

That's a very long explanation that what I'm saying is that I think that we're seeing within the provinces a growing strength of government. The governors are becoming a little bit more independent -- like our governors are in the United States. And what we have to do -- or one of the jobs that we have here for MND-North is to help them push their agendas with the central government. And that's, quite frankly, what we've been asked to do by both General Petraeus and the ambassador. So that is probably job two for me.

I didn't mean to paint a rosy picture, because there's a lot of problems still. But I think we're just tackling them. We have to tackle them one problem at a time and help the great Iraqi people stand up.

Q Okay. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Sir? GEN. HERTLING: Don't you want to ask me what problem one is?

Q Problem one? Sorry?

GEN. HERTLING: Problem one -- yeah, problem one is continuing with our Iraqi security forces, both the army and the police -- who I have found to be much improved in competence and capacity since I left here in 2004 -- to go continue to pursue al Qaeda and any extremist group that would continue to threaten the Iraqi people. And what's great about being here right now is the Iraqi people are seeing that too and they're supporting both the army, the police, and the coalition forces in our area -- for the most part.

Q Thanks.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Faiz.

All right. Bruce.

Q Hey, General. Bruce McQuain with QandO.net.

My question has to do -- I noticed today that Karbala province was turned over to the Iraqis. And on the sheet we got down from Jack, it's mentioned in there that you folks in MND-North are looking at turning Nineveh province to Iraqi control. What are the benchmarks that say to you that the Iraqis are ready now to take that province?

GEN. HERTLING: You know, it's a very complicated set of benchmarks. And I think the biggest one -- and to simplify it the most -- it's when the government feels that they can do it. And I know that that's a simplistic approach, but the governors of Nineveh -- who I've met and had meetings with as recently as yesterday -- is concerned about some of the security issues there. We're seeing a continued flow across the borders -- especially the Rabiya port of entry and Habur Gate port of entry -- with continued flow of people that should not be here. And he is trying to correct that in his province.

The Nineveh province actually has two of the better army divisions in the Iraqi army. One commanded by an unbelievably charismatic leader by the name of General Mootah (sp), the 2nd Iraq Army Division; and the 3rd commanded by a general by the name of Major General Tahim (sp), who are both, in my view, are two excellent leaders who are developing their force. But quite frankly, they understand their force is not capable just yet of independent actions or operational over watch, as we call it. So we will continue to be in daily conversation with the provincial governor and the central government on when they can go to PIC or the Provincial Iraqi Control.

There's been several estimates of when that could be, and quite frankly, they vary any time between December through April of next year. But that's something that -- it's going to have to go to the central government with and I'm going to have to make my recommendation with to my boss. But to answer your question -- that's a very long answer -- to answer your question: I think that Nineveh will certainly be the next province to go to PIC.

Q Thanks.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Richard.

GEN. HERTLING: Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Richard Fernandez.

Q Yes. Hi, General. This is Richard Fernandez of the Belmont Club.

I was wondering if there was any worry up north about how things were going to play out in the south, especially as regards the outlook for oil, which may be generated in the north -- if there was any worry about the way things were playing out in Basra?

GEN. HERTLING: Oh. Hmmm -- you know, I'm not sure how to answer that. I'm not sure really what the question is. I think what the central government is very concerned with is, first of all, the oil law -- the hydrocarbon laws. But secondly, you know, they just want to get the oil fields and the oil refineries working to full capacity again. The infrastructure damage after decades of abuse by Saddam Hussein is evident. I wish -- I'm going to the Baiji oil refinery later this week to talk to an unbelievably talented technician by the name of Dr. Obeti (sp), who single handedly is trying to put that thing together under the most extreme and difficult of circumstances, given the infrastructure damage and the lack of electricity to go to full capacity. But when they do -- and they've been increasing their output gradually over the last several months, with some help from the Iraqi army and from us -- I think that you'll see a rise in the Iraqi economy as well. And I think they're dependent on the eventual passing of the hydrocarbon laws to help further the development of those facilities and capacities.

Now, that was just a soldier's answer to a very technical, economic and oil question. So I probably got half of what I just gave you wrong.

Q Right. Thank you so much.

MR. HOLT: And Mike.

Q General, thanks so much for doing this.

I guess my question to you would be, sort of what -- you say that this is a significant impact, this cache that you guys have seized. And so my question would be sort of how -- how significant is the EFP issue over there? I mean, what's your sense of what proportion of casualties are being caused by these things, how this problem of the EFP rates, versus the problem of al Qaeda and how progress against the EFP problem rates against progress against al Qaeda?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, I'll tell you -- al Qaeda is an organization. The EFP, as you know, is a technology, but it's an extremely deadly and lethal technology. And the enemy knows that and we know he knows that. It is -- they are extremely effective when they go off against a piece of equipment. They are extremely traumatic when they go off arbitrarily and kill Iraqi civilians, or instead of going through a Humvee or a Stryker, they go through instead an Iraqi pickup truck or an Iraqi sedan. So both from a standpoint of security and building security for the population, as well as protecting our soldiers, defeating the EFP and finding those caches are extremely important to us.

I don't know if that answers your question.

Q Well, I just -- I'm sort of pushing for what -- it seems like we're making a lot of good progress against al Qaeda. And this cache is, obviously, significant, but do we feel like we're really making progress against the EFP problem, or is that something that is in fact getting worse?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, I don't know if it's getting worse or not. I've got to look at some statistics to answer you on that one. All I know is every EFP that goes off has a much greater chance of doing damage than any other type of explosion. So yeah, it's important for us to find them before they go off. But that's not to say that finding and killing or capturing al Qaeda isn't just as important. They're both very important.

Q Would you say these are the two highest priorities right now?

GEN. HERTLING: No. I'd say continuing to pursue al Qaeda is my number one priority. I want to continue to keep them on the ropes. They are a little bit discouraged and scattered. And even the fact that bin Laden's message points that out is an indicator of how disrupted they are. But they are still out there and they are still causing damaging and death to the Iraqi people and to our soldiers. So that's certainly number one on my priority list.

Number two is stopping any other kind of extremist from interfering with the continued march of progress of the Iraqi government. And it's, unfortunately, for the most part those other extremists that are using the EFPs. So that particular fight against our enemies deals with both al Qaeda and any other extremists, but especially those extremists that would use EFPs.

Q I appreciate it. Thank you. Thank you very much, General.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Jeff

GEN. HERTLING: Yes. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Jeff, are you still with us?

Q I'm here.

Go ahead.

GEN. HERTLING: I hate to do this to you, but I've got a commander's update I have to go to. If you don't mind -- it's 8:00 now. I've got to go to this session with my commanders. So I'm going to turn it over to Major Kageleiry, if you don't mind. It was a treat talking to you all. Maybe we can do this again some time.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

Q Hopefully we can.

MAJ. KAGELEIRY: Okay. Have a good night, gentlemen. Hope to reach you again.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you, ma'am.

Q Hey, Jack. I'm still here, but no problem. I was -- I didn't have a question anyway.

MR. HOLT: Okay. All right. And sorry I didn't get through every body. We had quite a few folks online. So we'll try this again. Hopefully we can get him back on here soon.

Q       Thanks, Jack.

Q       I missed my chance to say "1st Armored Division alum," darn it!

MR. HOLT:   (Laughs.)

Q       All right.  Bye.

MR. HOLT:   Bye.

END.